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## CONGREVE AS DRAMATIST

A due appreciation of Congreve's study of the amusing and the exquisite in affectation should bring him the wider reading which he deserves. It will scarcely help him to a popular success on the stage. I am too good a lover of Congreve to advocate an acting revival, because it is scarcely conceivable that stage presentations of these plays, except in a limited and special manner, could succeed.

To begin with, it is true as in the days of Voltaire, who criticized the looseness of this drama, that the ear is a greater prude than the eye,—

“ Chastes sont les oreilles,  
Encor que les yeux soient fripons,”—

as La Fontaine puts it; but nowadays both eye and ear are delicate, at least among the audiences that attend “legitimate drama”. And neither eye nor ear would endure with equanimity in a mixed audience the prurient dealings of a Tattle with Miss Prue, even though Prue should romp through her scenes as Mrs. Clive is reported to have done. The reader may sniff at this, and point with superiority or horror to our comic opera. Neither anatomy nor man's interest in it have changed in two hundred years, and our comic opera uses both. But there is a line fixed by convention for our generation across which the popular dramatist does not step, and this line Congreve, who wrote for audiences with conventions even more different from ours than were their morals, crosses in every play. The finest scenes, it is true, are but little tainted, but even in them there is an ineradicable freedom of language and action which would attract undue attention in the modern playhouse, and so destroy or lessen the artistic effect of the whole.

Furthermore, these plays are not well constructed,—and a play must be well constructed to stand transplanting from the stage of one century to that of another. Each one is an intrigue entangled about a love story, and there is so little that is natural about the union that the great scenes—Millamant's surrender with all the honors of war, the blue-stocking liaison of Brisk

and Lady Froth, Belinda and Araminta in St. James's Park—seem only to be happy inspirations but lightly attached to the main thread of the plot. Vagueness of story results, and a complicated action which exacts an undue attentiveness, and must sometimes have diverted the speculations of the audience from what was to occur to what had happened in the previous act. It was precisely "Love for Love" and "The Old Bachelor",—where the fault is least noticeable, and the plot, as a result, is least complex,—which were the popular successes among the four comedies.

In a recent criticism of Congreve's ability as a playwright, William Archer suggests that the author did not fit his scheme of acts to his material. He had, in other words, a three-act play without being conscious of the fact, and, being familiar with the five-act form only, made a bad tailor's job of the whole. The point seems difficult, and must be left to experts in dramaturgy. An easier explanation of Congreve's deficiencies in structure offers itself if one notes how much more he was interested in character than in action. Indeed, he belonged in the reaction against the story-play of the Elizabethans, a reaction in which Ben Jonson, Congreve's sponsor in so many things, was the first great name, and to which all the authors of the comedy of 'humors' contributed. Shakespeare's reaction was only partial. "Twelfth Night", of which Congreve's "Way of the World" is sometimes reminiscent, is full of 'humor' characters, yet never for an instant does this lover of the story relax his emphasis upon the plot. But Congreve tastes the fine comedy of the world through character almost exclusively. His plots are almost melodramatic. While his stage folk exhibit their charming or their amusing affectations the story is sometimes almost lost to sight, to suddenly appear in tangled complexity, as in the last scene of "The Way of the World", where loves, jealousies, intrigues, deeds of settlement and of trust are all swung together in the attempt to solve quickly the difficulties of the play. Having created Sir Paul Plyant (the elderly husband who kicked in bed and was pinned up in blankets by his wife), and the peppery Lady Wishfort, he is clearly more interested in their delightful follies than in the nasty and rather conventional intrigue plots which

they adorn. The actors pirouette while the story wanders, until it has to be jerked forward now and then with some haste.

Some improvement in technique is clearly needed. But since Molière, Jonson, Sheridan, all wrote good stage comedies of very much the same nature in five acts, it seems that Congreve's weakness is due not so much to the form he chose as to avoidable errors in the construction of his play. He was so interested in the depiction of personality that he neglected action, the all-important factor in an acting play.

And there is yet a third reason why Congreve did not and cannot hold the stage. The dialogue of his plays is not good dramatic dialogue. It is too literary—by which one means that its connotations, its subtle suggestions, its flavor will not and cannot cross the footlights with sufficient certainty to keep an average audience in touch with the intentions of the author. Shakespeare is literary and Shakespeare will act. Yes, but note that in all the successful acting plays of Shakespeare enough comes over to assure a comprehension of the play's development, even if much waits for the closet. Hermione on trial, for example. How many hearers of "A Winter's Tale" could give a full account of the emotions which inspire her great speech, and yet no one fails to understand its place in the dramatic argument. Shakespeare gets the points of his scenario into the ears of his audience, even when such thoughts as those expressed in Hamlet's soliloquy must necessarily wait upon a closer acquaintance with the text. But Congreve's motivation, his character exposition, and, worst of all, his complicated plots, are involved in a brilliant, subtle dialogue, where the speakers play for points of wit as tennis champions for points of score. For example, from the lines which follow, quoted from "The Way of the World", we are to learn that Mrs. Marwood is in love with Mirabell, who is indifferent to her; and that she is loved by Fainall:—

*Mira.* But for the discovery of this amour, I am indebted to your friend, or your wife's friend, Mrs. Marwood.

*Fain.* What shou'd provoke her to be your enemy, unless she has made advances which you have slighted? Women do not easily forgive omissions of that nature.

*Mira.* She was always civil to me, 'till of late; I confess I am not one of

those coxcombs who are apt to interpret a woman's good manners to her prejudice ; and think that she who does not refuse 'em ev'ry thing can refuse 'em nothing.

*Fain.* You are a gallant man, Mirabell ; and tho' you may have cruelty enough not to satisfy a lady's longing ; you have too much generosity, not to be tender of her honor. Yet you speak with an indifference which seems to be affected ; and confesses you are conscious of a negligence.

*Mira.* You pursue the argument with a distrust that seems to be unaffected, and confesses you are conscious of a concern for which the lady is more indebted than is your wife.

An audience misses such cues more often than the actors miss theirs ; and when we consider that accidents of delivery and of noise are sure to increase the difficulty, it is not in the least surprising. Nor is the fine and rapid repartee in which Congreve delighted more likely to reach them fully ; and if it does not reach, then, as has been shown in our modern plays of wit, the sparkling dialogue is likely to confuse the ear. Public speakers and most playwrights know that a joke must be obvious in proportion to the size of the audience. Congreve's best wit, one hazards a guess, was table or drawing-room wit, even in his own day. One guesses that even in the successful plays—which are quite as 'literary' in dialogue as the others—it was the grossities of Prue, of Heartwell, of Bluffe, that raised the laughter of the house. Indeed, it is difficult to share Macaulay's surprise that "The Way of the World", most carefully written, most decent of the comedies, failed upon the stage.

It is probable, then, that we shall never see Congreve really successful in our theatre. The only comedies that were acted successfully in Congreve's own days are precisely the most offensive to our sense of what is decent. The best play was the least actable then, and is so now. His work loses when it becomes closet-drama merely, for who can imagine Millamant, with her shoals of fools attending, Suckling on her lips, her fan broken in a pet, the long labors of the toilet justified by perfect success—who can imagine Millamant fresh, vivid, and living, as the Bracegirdle played her ! But for a century now these comedies, willy-nilly, *have* been closet-drama, nor do we fail of some compensation for their fate. As books, we may leave the indecencies to the judgment of the readers, who may skip or intellectualize them ; we can dismiss the elusive plots as a slight objec-

tion, since one can always turn back the page. We can enjoy the wittiest and most polished of dramatic diction, rejoicing at what makes the stage manager grit his teeth.

Congreve has thus lost what distinction he enjoyed as a playwright; but he remains a great dramatist. This is not a contradiction in terms. The good playwright must be at least a *good* dramatist. The good dramatist may often be a very poor playwright. Many of our own best playwrights, such men as Scribe, or Sardou, or Dumas *filis*, or Bulwer-Lytton, have certainly not been great dramatists. Many really great dramatists, of whom Browning is an example, have been, on the whole, bad playwrights. Some great dramatists, as Shakespeare and the Greek tragedians, have been admirable in both functions, even if lapse of time, which bears with especial force upon writers for the theatre, has lessened the stageability of their plays. The dramatist is he who sees life as a conflict of wills—to use the good old term, which is hard to improve upon. In addition, he is able to pass beyond the bounds of his own experience, and give to each participant in the struggle a character and a voice proper to the actor conceived. He seizes upon a conflict, and creates the characters in it.

It is between Browning and Shakespeare that we will place Congreve. His plays exhibit the dramatist's view of life in a high though not the highest degree. They were imperfectly adapted to the stage of his own day; still less to our own. He was a middling playwright; his genius lay in his dramatic treatment of life.

There is an interesting resemblance between Congreve and Shakespeare in the exhibition of this dramatic instinct. Both men seem to have been possessed of a kind of amiable self-effacement. While the creatures of their brains were making such a stir in the world, their own quiet doings were peaceful and little marked. The anecdote which alone survives in popular knowledge from Congreve's life is Voltaire's assertion that he wished to be visited not as a writer but as a gentleman in private life. Voltaire thought this snobbishness; but the life of a private gentleman was the one to which Congreve always aspired, and this description fitted him exactly. Shakespeare's

ambition seems to have been the same. Both men, in fact, were of that ideal temper for the dramatist, which, free of the egoism which belongs to action, takes fire nevertheless at the imperfect attempts of the active world to express itself. Some readers, it is true, have tried to identify Mirabell, and his prototypes among the Congrevians, with Congreve. Possibly they are not altogether wrong, for the careless connoisseurship of life which animates these figures appears so frequently in the comedies that one is tempted to deduce an ego seeking expression. Furthermore, Mirabell, in mood if not in acts, is much like the impression one gains from the few contemporary descriptions of the agreeable, lazy Congreve, lover of port, of the Bracegirdle, and of pleasant, aristocratic society. If so, this personal appearance is probably a point of difference with Shakespeare; indeed, if true, it may account for the limits of sympathy which kept Congreve in his narrow field of rakish comedy, while Shakespeare sounded all men in their moods. But one doubts whether the identity was very close. The dramatist has narrowed his range, not to himself, but to a society with which he sympathized. It is not Congreve but Congreve's perception of the perfect libertine which finds a place in his plays.

Indeed it was his true dramatic instinct that made Congreve so successful in his depiction of a libertine society. Sensitive to every wish of this licentious world, he reflected the slime, but also the orchids above it. His own spirit unclouded by the grossness he did not condemn, his perception of human nature only limited by the walls of his court and coffee-house London, which shut out God, and the free air, and purity, but shut in much that was at least well worth considering, he was able to report with imaginative truth an important phase of civilization. A more moral, or a more satirical writer would have missed or perverted it. A less truly dramatic writer would have lacked the detachment requisite in order that its romantic and its humorous figures should be faithfully portrayed.

Thus favorable conditions waited upon the creation of these comedies, which, in spite of all moral strictures, remain the finest of our dramatic literature in prose. A gay society made itself libertine and elegant in imitation of the French court, but,

like all imitations of one race by another, took upon itself characteristics which belonged to its new home only. In England the rake spoke and acted with a coarseness which the court of Louis XIV did not tolerate. In England, too, the Millamants and Cynthias who flowered from the rank soil of libertinism were new creations, little more French than Ophelia was Danish, no more French than Juliet was Italian.

Into this society came the young Congreve. He took the comedy as he found it; that is, the comedy of men's humors begun by Jonson, and now directed toward the affectations of the smart set, and swung off its moral basis by the great debauch of the Restoration. He discovered, better than Wycherley and his other predecessors, the ideals of this society, and satirized more cleverly such of its defects as his limited vision permitted him to see. For him at least the romance of the gallant life was still untouched by remorse for the actualities which waited upon it. Therefore, being better romanticist than moralist, he left the coarse and brutal still unlovely, since he did not feel their ugliness; the noble he disengaged and perfected. Shakespeare once did a like service for the moralless, sunny-hearted toper — and gave us Falstaff. I do not believe that Millamant is more blameable or less worthy of praise.

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